

## Antarctica—The South Pole

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I had hardly moved into the Press Hut at McMurdo, when I was offered the very rare chance of a flight to the South Pole. Weight and space on these flights is at a great premium, as all supplies must be flown to the Pole during the summer months. During the continuous darkness of the winter, no flying is possible. However, mine was a special flight for the benefit of Commander A.E. Church, the US Navy Chief of Staff for Civil Engineering and his assistants. He was in charge of the Design and the Building of a new American South Pole Station, an urgent task, as I was soon to see for myself. The then existing 1969 station had been constructed during the IGY, 30 years ago, and had sunk several meters below the surface of the ice, owing to the tons of new snow deposited each year on its roofs. The new station for 16 scientists to overwinter was to have a 50 m diameter dome and four towers.

In a turbo-prop Hercules we flew the distance of 1300 km in three hours. We followed the way over the Beardmore Glacier, the same route which Captain Scott had taken in 1910. As the weather was good and no white-out, the pilot descended to a low altitude, so that we could clearly see the enormous crevasses in the glacier. It was almost impossible to visualise how a few men, dragging heavy sledges uphill, could cross this miniature Himalayan range. Looking down vertically into the crevasses, the white of the ice surface changed into a deep blue below and finished with a black streak at the bottom. Yet, Scott, Dr Wilson and their intrepid companions overcame this ice barrier successfully, only to die on the return journey by another route.

The first sight of any human activity, as we neared the South Pole, was a number of huge black balloons lying flat on the ice surface. Made of neoprene rubber, I was told, they were the oil fuel reservoirs for the winter months, refilled during the summer from supply aircraft, like our flight. At the South Pole itself, there were only a number of radio masts visible above the surface. The pilot could have landed anywhere on this flat ice field, but he chose the right spot, near the entrance to the underground station. Here we stood on ice that was in 1969 more than 3 km thick above sea level, and at this height and at a summer temperature of minus 40 degrees, I could only gasp for breath. [-40° is the only point of the temperature scales where Celsius and Fahrenheit are equal.]

I soon recovered without oxygen (held available for elderly Senators on a visit) and entered down an eerie tunnel, a long flights of steps, with large icicles hanging down from the sagging roofs, although large iron girders had been placed everywhere for support. All the girders were buckled and bent, such was the weight and the pressure from the ice above and on both sides. It was immediately obvious that major civil engineering work was essential, or a new station had to be built, if work at 90° South was to continue.